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Book Notes

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Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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*SPOILER ALERT: please be advised that these notes discuss the secret in detail and give away the ending.

Thematic and Plot Summary

'Her goodness had limits. She could have easily gone her whole life without knowing those limits, but now she knew exactly where they lay.'
(p 306)

Grief, love, regret, guilt, accident, fate, obligation – words aren't fully able to describe the often traumatic vagaries of life. This harrowing novel tells three stories, of three different women, and three families. Connections emerge as the alternate stories are told over seven crucial days in their lives, beginning on a Monday and ending on Easter Sunday. Cecilia, Tess and Rachel are such good women ... they have lived blameless lives albeit with one having endured a tragedy which links them all when two husbands' secrets are revealed. The world they know becomes a much more threatening one, and they are each challenged in different ways. Grief haunts the action, as does guilt, for the grief-stricken often, for example, think, 'if I hadn't done that, would I have saved/stopped, kept him or her?' Every life is tormented by this question in large or small ways. This novel details three families' responses to a 28 year old tragedy and how that alters the course of each of their lives.

The first three chapters set the scene in focussing alternately on three different women. Cecilia Fitzpatrick (nee Bell) is a super-organised housewife with three daughters Isabel, Esther and Polly, and a busy and yet devoted husband and father named John-Paul. Apart from organising their household and a myriad of school related activities, Cecilia works part-time as a Tupperware representative. They live in Sydney and the girls attend St Angela's school. Cecilia's comfortable life, however had been disturbed the year before when she witnessed the roadside death of a small boy dressed in a Spiderman outfit. And then, she finds a letter addressed to her to be opened in the event of John-Paul's death which reveals that he has harboured a dark secret throughout their marriage. Tess Curtis (nee O'Leary) and her husband Will, and cousin Felicity have a marketing and design business in Melbourne. She and her cousin are the children of twin sisters Lucy and Mary, and so have always been particularly close. So when Will and Felicity announce that they've fallen in love, Tess is aghast and reacts by hurriedly booking two tickets for herself and their son Liam to go home to Sydney to her ailing mum Lucy O'Leary. There she meets an old boyfriend named Connor Whitby, now the PE teacher at the school, and embarks on a torrid affair. Rachel Crowley is

Thematic and Plot Summary (cont'd)

a widow, a devoted grandmother to Jacob, mother to Rob, and mother-in-law to Lauren. She works part-time at St Angela's, the school which Tess and Felicity also attended and which Cecilia's children currently attend. Her life was forever changed in 1984 when her only daughter Janie was murdered as a teenager and her grief has coloured everything since. But when she finds Lauren has been offered a two year contract in NY and that the family will be moving there, her carefully constructed world begins to crumble. And then she discovers an old video which seems to implicate Connor Whitby in her daughter's death, and her rage threatens to tip over into something really ugly. As Janie's 28th anniversary approaches she becomes more and more unhinged. But little does she know that John-Paul has confessed to his wife that he murdered Janie. Thus two husband's secrets have derailed their lives and threaten to destroy them all.

When these secrets are revealed, each of these characters has to re-assess their relationships with those who are closest to them. Tess begins to question her relationship with Felicity, and thinks, 'Felicity had been her saviour. Wasn't that true?' (p 150) But her mother asserts that 'Felicity never let you have anything just for yourself,' (p 150). 'Felicity kept you shy, ... It suited her. You weren't really that shy.'(p 151) Tess recognises that 'maybe she'd even *liked* the fact that she'd sensed Felicity was in love with Will, because it had made Will seem all the more desirable, and because it had been perfectly safe.'(p 323) She also realises that since both Will and Felicity have relied on her to be the 'still centre' in their lives, they all have a problem: 'It was Tess's job to soothe them, to jolly them along, to do the whole glass is half-full, it will all work out, you'll feel better in the morning thing. How could they possibly have an affair without her there to help? They needed Tess there to say, 'It's not your fault!' (p 131) Tess begins to question the person she has been with Felicity: 'Tess and Felicity sat on the sidelines of life smirking at the players.'(p 291) Cecilia, too, is forced to re-evaluate her love of John-Paul whose confession contains his sense that she was a purifying lake of goodness (p 183), which angers her even more. 'She'd thought that was something they had in common, when in fact the John-Paul she thought she knew didn't even exist. He was a fabrication.

Thematic and Plot Summary (cont'd)

His whole life was an act: an act for God's benefit, to let him off the hook.' (p 184) But despite all this she realises that she won't turn him in, and that she still loves him. Rachel acknowledges her neglect of Rob after Janie's death and her blindspot towards Lauren, and begins to 'give' a little. This echoes Lucy's advice to her daughter Tess: 'Whatever happens, don't get all rigid, Tess. Be prepared to be a bit . . . bendy.'(p 312) Rachel doesn't understand Lauren but she finally begins to realise that Rob has a happy life with her, and that she too has future prospects, even if separated from Jacob.

What 'could have been' is a huge theme in this book. 'It was a shame that Janie's life was going to end in just over eight hours because she wasn't her nicest self. She had been an adorable baby, a winsome little girl, a shy, sweet young teen, but around the time of her seventeenth birthday last May, she'd changed. She was dimly aware of her mild awfulness. It wasn't her fault.' (p 66) The passage: 'If Janie had lived ...waiting to happen to her.'(pp 67-8) is a beautifully written summary of how a life might have evolved. The novel also ends with a series of 'what ifs?' relating to the other characters, which are heart-rending in their poignancy.

Grief is a major theme in this novel. Rachel has never felt the same person since Janie's death: 'It was something to do with her sense of always feeling separate from everybody else, as if things that worried them couldn't possibly worry her, as if she was immune from the ordinariness of life.'(pp 121-2) She realises belatedly that Rob has suffered too, not only in losing a sister but also in some sense having lost his parents' full attention. Tess has never really recovered from her parents' divorce and is terrified of repeating the same mistakes with her child.

Entangled with grief is guilt. Rachel feels that she was absent when Janie died because of a brief flirtation with Toby Murphy. 'Only Rachel's heart had stubbornly refused to do the right thing and kept on beating. It made her feel ashamed, the way her desire for sex had shamed her.' (pp 142-3) John-Paul will never recover from his guilt, and neither will Cecilia. Both feel that Polly's injuries are the penance to be paid for keeping their secret. And Rachel will suffer guilt, too, over the accident which injured Polly.

Thematic and Plot Summary (cont'd)

Neurotic insecurity and how it affects the decisions we make in life is another theme in this novel. 'There are thousands of us walking around with this neurotic little secret.

People you wouldn't expect: CEOs who can do big presentations to shareholders but can't handle small talk at the Christmas party, actors with crippling shyness, doctors who are terrified of making eye contact. I felt like I had to hide it from everyone, and the more I hid it, the bigger it seemed.' (p 373) Tess (who has always suffered from social anxiety) receives a touching gift from her dad – a compass – which is another symbol of the fact that each character in this novel is struggling to choose the right path in life.

Ethics and morals are key questions here. What happens when we find that we are capable of doing something which seems entirely out of character; when we betray someone we love, or do something even more abhorrent, often in one chance action or moment? John-Paul, Cecilia, Tess, Will and Rachel have each done something they would not have thought possible, but that's the nature of life. It is no accident that the novel concludes on Easter Sunday, a day of resurrection and redemption. None of these characters can go back; but they can take charge of their lives and do the best they can with what strength and courage they have left. They can rescue the tattered bonds between them and those they love. They can face the future with some hope.

'There are so many secrets about our lives we'll never know.' (p 399) It is a fact of life that everyone has small and sometimes large secrets about their lives which they won't share with others. When a secret is discovered we often accuse the person of lying or covering things up. But perhaps there is an innate understanding in all of us that some things are best left unsaid, despite the pain and guilt that might cause. Perhaps, 'Some secrets are meant to stay secret forever. Just ask Pandora.' (p 402)

Writing Style

1. Narrative Perspective, Person and Tense: This is told in third person, past tense which lends a sense of narrative mystery and foreboding to the narrative. Given the intense focus on three women, why did the author choose to tell this story in third person?
2. Structure is carefully crafted to include these alternate narratives. The novel is broken up into seven sections headed by the days of the week beginning on Monday and ending on Easter Sunday. In each section there are several chapters and in them alternate stories of the three main families, focused on three women, are told although as the story progresses the women's stories merge, and in each given chapter several alternate views are offered. How does this form of telling influence your reading? Did you find it enticing?
3. What aspects of style did you particularly notice in reading this novel?
4. Characters are beautifully if sometimes obliquely described in this book. Choose a passage and discuss what it reveals about the characters depicted in it.
5. Humour is often present in this novel, despite the seriousness of the subject matter. It is astute when describing suburbia and woman's behavior in social settings, and sharp in its humour about the various relationship issues being explored: 'This is like a play. Evil mistress exits stage right. Enter chastened husband.'(p 334) There are also wry observations about children. eg. 'Thanks to Esther, Cecilia had spent the last six months imagining herself scooping up drowning children from the icy waters of the Atlantic while the *Titanic* sunk. Now she was going to be in Berlin, separated from her children by the Wall.' (p 100) Choose one scene and discuss the use of humour in it.

The Author

Liane Moriarty is the author of four novels, *Three Wishes* and *The Last Anniversary*, *What Alice Forgot* and *The Hypnotist's Love Story* all of which were published successfully around the world and translated into seven languages. Writing as L.M. Moriarty, she is also the author of the 'Space Brigade' series for children. Liane lives in Sydney with her husband, son and daughter. For more information visit her [website](#).



Questions for Discussion

1. When Cecilia finds a letter addressed to her by her husband, 'To be opened only in the event of my death' (p 15) she is typically amazed by his lack of planning skills: 'One thing: how exactly was she meant to have found this letter if he had died? She might never have found it!' (p 18) And then she's tormented by the ethics of opening it. What would you have done?
2. The novel opens with a quote: 'To err is human; to forgive is divine.' Alexander Pope. Is forgiveness over-rated? Should we simply accept our feelings of guilt and get on with it? Discuss.
3. The story of Pandora, Zeus and Epimetheus is a 'foreword' in this book and mentioned again in the Epilogue. What significance does this classic narrative have in this narrative?
4. Cecilia is the classic 'yummy mummy': 'her life was now extraordinarily well organised, as if motherhood was a sport and she was a top athlete. It was like she was thinking, How far can I go with this? How much more can I fit in my life without losing control?' (p 14) She is beautiful, always well-groomed, an excellent cook, extremely houseproud, and manages a successful part time business as well as anchoring the school P&C! Is it possible to do so many things successfully, or does something eventually have to give?
5. 'It was true, perhaps, that ever since that morning last year she'd been aware of an underlying sense of fragility, a new understanding that a life of coriander and laundry could be stolen in an instant, that your ordinariness could vanish and suddenly you're a woman on your knees, your face lifted to the sky and some women are running to help, but others are already averting their heads, with the words not articulated, but felt: Don't let this touch me.' (pp 8-9) Cecilia has suffered from this nagging fear, but when calamity befalls her how does she deal with it?

Questions for Discussion (cont'd)

6. The issue of parenting is a chord which runs through this text insistently. Cecilia and John-Paul are truly lovely parents and yet she thinks that 'She was a far better mother when she had an audience.' (p 17) Rachel and Tess also suffer doubts over their positive roles in their children's lives. Is being a perfect parent an unreal expectation? 'I don't need to tell you this, do I? You're a mother. You'd do anything for your children, just like I'd do anything for mine.' (p 217) '... but nothing truly hurt until it happened to you. Most of all, to your child.' (p 377) How powerful a feeling is being a parent? Are there limits to what you'd do for a child?
7. Cecilia has a philosophy: 'She'd learned that with her daughters. Don't say a word. Don't ask a question. Give them enough time and they'd finally tell you what was on their mind. It was like fishing. It took silence and patience.' (p 10) Discuss this and other aspects of parenting described in this novel.
8. Cecilia thinks: 'She'd married John-Paul because of the father she knew he would be.'(p 305) Rachel thinks of Rob: 'He was a good dad. A better dad than his own father had been. That was the way these days – all the men seemed to be better fathers ...' (p 316) This seems to be an accepted wisdom these days. But is it true? Does changing nappies and playing with the kids really make a father 'better'?
9. 'John-Paul point-blank refused to go up there. He suffered from terrible claustrophobia and walked six flights of stairs every day to his office so he could avoid taking the lift. The poor man had regular nightmares about being trapped in a room where the walls were contracting. 'The walls!' he'd shout, just before he woke up, sweaty and wild-eyed. 'Do you think you were locked in a cupboard as a child?' Cecilia has asked him once (she wouldn't have put it past his mother), but he'd said he was pretty sure he hadn't.'(p 13) Everyone in this novel has some sort of phobia. Tess has social anxiety; Will has had a midlife crisis; Connor needs therapy. Does everyone have some underlying obsession in your opinion?

Questions for Discussion (cont'd)

10. Cecilia thinks of the Berlin Wall: 'Only a man could come up with something so ruthless: so essentially stupid and yet brutally effective. Was that sexist?' (p 4) and of her husband: 'John-Paul was one of the smartest people she knew, except for when it came to the logistics of life. 'I seriously don't understand how men came to rule the world,' she'd said to her sister Bridget this morning, after she'd told her about how John-Paul had lost his rental car keys in Chicago.' (pp 18-9) Are men inherently brutal and women not? Are men inherently disorganised and women not? Discuss.
11. 'Did you know that some people wish the Berlin Wall never come down?' said Esther. 'That's weird, isn't it? Why would you want to be stuck behind a wall?'(p 332) Another thematic undercurrent is the idea of the Berlin Wall. Esther is working on a project about it, and it is mentioned repeatedly in relation to key events in all their lives. The day the concept of the Berlin Wall was mooted in the paper in 1961, Ed proposed to Rachel (p 60); in 1977 Lucy and Mary were pregnant with the girls when a protest in Berlin killed three teenagers; in June 1987 the Wall is mentioned in the context of Lucy and Andrew's marriage breaking up over her infidelity; Cecilia kissed someone there as it was first being dismantled in 1989; as Cecilia becomes more agitated by her possible decision, she makes comparisons with those who challenged or escaped the Berlin Wall... What price should we pay for freedom? Who deserves it? Is it worth risking someone you love's life to achieve it? She reads about the end of the Berlin Wall and weeps: 'Happy endings always made her cry. It was the relief.' (p 233); Cecilia met John-Paul on 22 June 1990 the day the Wall finally came down (p 394). What does the Berlin Wall signify in this text thematically?
12. 'Family life, even with just one little boy, had its own familiar rhythms and it was perfectly possible to keep right on dancing like you always had, even when your mind was somewhere else.' (p 57) Discuss.

Questions for Discussion (cont'd)

13. 'Sometimes there was the pure, primal pain of grief; and other times there was anger, the frantic desire to claw and hit and kill; and sometimes, like right now, there was just ordinary, dull sadness, settling itself softly, suffocatingly over her like a heavy fog. She was just so damned sad.' (p 319) This is a beautifully crafted description of grief, and how the pain oscillates. Discuss.
14. 'She could not meet another brand-new group of mothers. She'd found socialising with the school mums difficult enough when her life was in perfect order. The chat, chat, chat, the swirls of laughter, the warmth, the friendliness (most mums were so very nice) and the gentle hint of bitchiness that ran beneath it all. She'd done it in Melbourne. She'd made a few friends on the outskirts of the inner social circle, but she couldn't do it again. Not now. She didn't have the strength. It was like someone had cheerfully suggested she run a marathon when she'd just dragged herself out of bed after suffering from the flu.' (p 88) Is this an accurate picture of women's interactions in school life in your opinion?
15. 'Did one act define who you were forever? Did one evil act as a teenager counteract twenty years of marriage, of good marriage, twenty years of being a good husband and a good father? Murder and you are a murderer. That was how it worked for other people. For strangers. For people you read about in the newspaper. Cecilia was sure about that, but did different rules apply to John-Paul? And if so, why?' (p 187) This is a huge ethical question, in relation to all the characters in this novel. It also relates to wider questions such as for example, the rehabilitation of those who are jailed for crimes. Discuss.
16. 'Rachel had seen three school principals come and go since she'd been secretary, and in her experience it wasn't possible to run a school while ignoring the grownups. It was a political job.' (p 92) 'All under control,' said Rachel. Just like Cecilia, she was helping keep Trudy in a job because she didn't see why the children of St Angela's shouldn't have a school principal from fairyland.' (p 94) Should Trudy have relied so much on these supporters? Isn't the job of a principal to be an administrator rather than a teacher?

Questions for Discussion (cont'd)

17. 'It seemed that all the niceties that made her a socially acceptable grown-up had been stripped away.'(pp 326-7) How thin a veneer is social nicety? Are we all playing the part of being civilised? And how easy is it for us to drop the facade?
18. 'There was no such thing as a good divorce for children.'(p 152) Discuss.
19. 'Marriage was a form of insanity; love hovering permanently on the edge of aggravation.'(p 385) 'It was his 'otherness'. It made everything – their bodies, their personalities, their feelings – seem more sharply defined. It wasn't logical, but the better you knew someone, the more blurry they became.' (p 386) How difficult is it to maintain interest in a long term and even much-loved partner?
20. 'You would think someone so good at project management could manage the project of packing a bag for Jacob when he came to stay the night, but apparently not.' (p 41) The women in this novel 'take no prisoners' when they are describing those around them. Discuss how humour is used in characterisation.
21. Accidents of fate determine all our lives. Although John-Paul believes he murdered Janie, he didn't. Although Rachel believed she was responsible for Polly's accident since she accelerated when she saw Connor, she is probably no more responsible than anyone who drives a little too fast in a quiet cul-de-sac. In the Epilogue, the author lists a few alternative lives for each of the characters. Human beings try to lay blame but really life itself is driven by accidents and no one is safe. Discuss.
22. Should secrets ever be kept? (Both Felicity and Lucy warn Tess not to tell Will about Connor. John-Paul might never have confessed to Cecilia.) Are there some things best left locked away and not revealed? Is secrecy ever warranted?

THE HUSBAND'S SECRET

Liane Moriarty

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